

Forerunners of Livy

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Livy certainly has plenty of name recognition; indeed his history of Rome is one of the most monumental histories ever written. Why did he write it? Or rather, why does it take the form that it takes? What were the options open to him? Christopher Smith takes us back in time to ask who was making the running in the Republic in terms of history writing and how Livy differs from them and from their Greek predecessors. In answering these questions, we gain a better understanding of where Livy comes from and what makes his work so special.

Think of a Roman historian, and you will probably think of Tacitus or Livy. Livy's massive work – 142 books of it no less – was popular enough in antiquity to be excerpted, summarized, and frequently referenced. We know that some 100 years after Livy was writing, the poet Martial welcomed a one-volume summary. Not that Livy's popularity pleased everyone: at about the same time as Martial was rejoicing in his abridged version, the emperor Domitian had a senator executed for collecting together the speeches of kings and generals in the work! Its sheer monumentality discouraged successors from writing rival accounts of Rome from its beginnings. We know of no histories of similar length and scope after Livy.

Livy and his Augustan context

Begun in the 30s B.C., Livy's early work might be regarded as 'triumviral literature' alongside the awkward and angry early works of Vergil and Horace; that is to say it was written in the uneasy period before Augustus' acquisition of sole power. Modern critics have found more and more to admire in it. But trying to work out whether Livy was an Augustan

supporter or not has proven unfruitful: he was far too sophisticated to be obviously prejudiced one way or the other, and, as we have already noted, the later books – those supposedly added to cover Augustus' reign – are lost. Covering the full range of Roman history, Livy certainly celebrated Roman virtues, but was aware of Roman vices too, and traced the struggle for balance and equilibrium between the many forces that constantly threatened the Republic. If he had a message for Augustus, this story of struggle may have been it.

So substantial and significant is Livy that it is easy to focus only on his history and to forget that he had many predecessors, even if most of what they wrote only survives in fragments, if at all. This would be a mistake. First, this encourages the notion that Livy was free to invent, and to retroject his own contemporary concerns into, the distant past; second, if anything, it encourages us to underestimate Livy's originality and transformation of the genre that was history writing; and third, we miss out on texts and authors who are fascinating in their own right.

Romans and the writing of history

It is well known that the Romans came to the writing of history rather late. The Greeks started early in the fifth century, but not until Fabius Pictor late in the third century B.C. did the Romans have a historian of their own – and he chose to write in Greek! So why did the Romans start writing history? And how surprising is it that they took so long to start? These questions may need to be slightly rephrased. Certainly, as far as we can tell, the annalistic style of writing history (i.e. history in which events are arranged chronologically, year by year) was a late development.

The history of Fabius Pictor may have had much in common in terms of its structuring of the past with Ennius' epic poem, the *Annales*, composed in the second century B.C., and it seems clear that the Romans (at least at first) did not go in for the rather circuitous narrative form favoured by the great Greek writer and 'Father of History', Herodotus. The reason for this may lie in the fact that they were used to a different kind of history writing – lists. It is also likely that other

media transferred information about the past – oral tradition, family history, dramatic performances, and so forth, although we know less about this than we should like. So when the Romans turned their hands to formally composed history in the third century B.C., they were not so much starting to write history as making a conscious decision about how history should be written.

What do we know about these pre-Livian historians? Like Fabius Pictor, Cincius Alimentus (late C3/C2 B.C.) and Aulus Postumius Albinus (C2 B.C.) wrote in Greek. All seem to have 'begun at the beginning' of time and carried on into their own period. They also enjoyed interesting lives – Fabius Pictor led a critical embassy to Delphi in 216 B.C. after the Roman disaster at the battle of Cannae against Hannibal. Cincius Alimentus was taken prisoner by Hannibal and was able to incorporate information he gained from the great general himself. Postumius Albinus was in Greece at the outset of the war in 146 B.C. and was involved in organizing the province of Achaëa.

Most of these early historians were senators and their close connection with public life may be significant in explaining the rise of history as a genre. The choice of Greek shows that this was intended at least in part for an external audience. Although many educated Romans may have spoken Greek by the second century B.C., the decision to write Rome's history in Greek permitted a broader audience to access it (and indeed we have an ancient library catalogue-entry from Tauromenium in Sicily for the history of Fabius Pictor). He and his historical colleagues took it upon themselves to explain how Rome fitted into the wider Hellenistic Mediterranean, establishing its and their own credentials through elaborate constructions of the mythical past, as well as accounts of Roman virtue. It was but a short step to historians like Cassius Hemina and Calpurnius Piso Frugi, who wrote in Latin. While the standard modern accounts of the evolution of Roman historiography begin with family history and arrive at the national epic, the national story may actually have come first.

Outliers and influences

So far, so good. But this summary has sidestepped one of the most interesting of the early historians, Cato the Elder. Cato is an outlier, as so often. He seems to have been the first to write in Latin, and his history, the *Origines*, was not annalistic. It is easier to say what it wasn't than what its structure was. The earlier part certainly describes the origins of Italian cities, and may suggest that there was some sort of geographical scheme. The latter part describes events closer to Cato's own time. Famously, he chose not to name individual generals (the only figure whose name he did supply is allegedly Hannibal's elephant, Surus!), but he did include his own speeches. The work was clearly influential and respected in many ways, especially for its style – but it was too odd to form a model for others, including Livy.

In the late second and more particularly the first century B.C., we see three distinct trends. First, annalistic histories became much longer: Cn. Gellius, Valerius Antias, and Claudius Quadrigarius each wrote well in excess of 20 books. Second, some historians chose to omit the distant past and focus on more contemporary history. This was true of Coelius Antipater and Cornelius Sisenna for instance, and perhaps gave Sallust the idea of his episodic pamphlets on the Jugurthan War and the Catilinarian conspiracy. Thirdly, we see the first autobiographies being written – including the dictator Sulla's lengthy attempt to immortalize himself.

Livy would have had access to much of this earlier work, and quotes his predecessors, sometimes by name, and often to disagree with them. One of his main disagreements is with one Licinius Macer, whose history was based, in part, on what he claimed was a new source – a list called the Linen Books – but, in the eyes of Livy and others, promoted his own family too much. This kind of criticism implies that a standard had emerged – or indeed had been there from the beginning – that it was the collective achievement of the Roman Republic which required celebration. It is interesting, therefore, that in the most complete autobiographical account from the late Republic, his commentaries on the Gallic and Civil wars, Julius Caesar always refers to himself in the third person, as if to resist the sense of individual self-aggrandisement which had begun to characterize the genre.

Tradition and innovation

So Livy had a substantial tradition with which to work. He was making choices all the time about which sources and modes of history writing to accept, and how to present history afresh for a new audience. On the few occasions when texts give us parallel versions of the same event, Livy's version is often longer, more stylistically

developed, and yet sometimes less vivid. Compare Livy 7.9–10 with first-century B.C. annalist Quintus Claudius Quadrigarius' theatrical account of Torquatus decapitating a Gaul in 367 B.C. (Aulus Gellius 9.13). What Livy wins in the style stakes, he loses by his prudishness. The evidence from the earlier historians shows the variety of traditions, especially for the Rome of the early kings. Livy flattens out this variety in order to give us a plausible narrative, only occasionally reminding us that there were other stories out there.

Livy's masterful synopsis should never permit us to forget that the Romans already had a history of doing history. The Romans had a clear and increasingly consistent story to tell for the period from at least the fourth century onwards. Livy's mastery was achieving an ever more sophisticated presentation of Rome's rise to greatness, but there may in fact have been very little in Livy which was not already in his predecessors. After Livy, it was not felt necessary to repeat the case; the next great Roman historian, Tacitus, chose a completely different style to emphasize how the days of balanced virtue were over.

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